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ABSTRACT

Spanish Harlem's Community District 4, known as one of New York City's most disadvantaged school districts, has developed a system of alternative educational programs, coupled with controlled parental choice. Having begun in 1974 with the creation of a single alternative elementary school, the system now serves about one-fifth of all elementary students and all junior high school students, who attend programs chosen from a selection of alternatives. The development of the District 4 system has challenged many conventional assumptions about school organization and management, including correspondence between buildings and schools and traditional boundaries between administrative and teaching roles. Although the system's effects on student achievement are unclear, there is substantial evidence that students are receiving considerable individual attention and that alternative programs are highly focused on academic learning for disadvantaged children. However, relations between District 4 and the larger administrative structure of the New York City Public Schools remain uncertain. Also, a substantial portion (80 percent) of elementary students lack access to alternative programs that are the focus of the district's instructional improvement. The creation of new programs is driven by teacher initiative and standards of quality, not by the objective of serving all students. (31 endnotes) (Author/MLH)

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Community School District 4, New York City

A Case of Choice

Richard F. Elmore

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ABSTRACT

Community District 4, one of New York City's most economically disadvantaged community school districts, has developed as system of alternative educational programs coupled with controlled parental choice. The system began in 1974 with the development of a single alternative elementary school and has developed gradually into a system in which about one-fifth of all elementary students and all junior high school students attend programs which they and their parents have chosen from a selection of alternatives.

The development of the District 4 system has drawn into question many conventional assumptions of school organization and management, including the correspondence between buildings and schools and traditional boundaries between administrative and teaching roles. While the effects of the District 4 system on student achievement are unclear, their is substantial evidence that students are receiving considerable individual attention and that alternative programs are highly focused on academic learning for disadvantaged children. Relations between District 4 and the larger administrative structure of the New York City Public Schools, however, remain uncertain.

This paper is one of three case studies dealing with educational choice published by the Center for Policy Research in Education. The other two case studies are The Minnesota Postsecondary Options Law: A Case of Choice, by Doug A. Archbald and Educational Clinics in Washington State: A Case of Choice, by Richard F. Elmore. Each case study was designed either to be used separately or in conjunction with Working Models of Choice, an analytical paper, by Richard F. Elmore. The basic facts of the separate cases are incorporated into the analytical paper. The cases, however, include little explicit analysis, and are as descriptive as possible. The cases may be used, then, as a vehicle to provoke analysis and discussion of public school choice independently of the author's analysis of the issue.

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Richard F. Elmore is professor of education at the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University. He is also senior research fellow with the Center for Policy Research in Education. His current research focuses on the effects of state and local policy on schools and classrooms and on changes in school structure based on novel conceptions of teaching and learning.

Dr. Elmore is senior author and editor of Restructured Schools: The Next Generation of Education Reform (Jossey-Bass, 1990) and co-author of Steady Work: Policy Practice and, Reform in American Education (RAND Corporation, 1988). He has held positions previously at Michigan State University, the University of Washington, and the Office of the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare of the Federal government. He is president of the Association for Public Policy and Management and a member of the Committee on Child Development of the National Research Council and the National Academy of Science.

COMMUNITY DISTRICT 4, NEW YORK CITY

THE SETTING

Community School District Number 4 occupies the area from 96th to 120th Streets, between Fifth Avenue and the East River, in the Borough of Manhattan, New York City. New Yorkers call this area East Harlem or Spanish Harlem, to distinguish it from the primarily Black area of central Harlem to the north and west. District 4 is among the poorest and most disadvantaged neighborhoods in New York City. About 59 percent of its 12,000 to 13,000 students are Hispanic, about 37 percent are Black; the remaining 4 percent or so non-minority students are, according to district administrators, largely students transferring into the district from the outside. While a significant proportion of families in District 4 have wage-earners in the household, about half the children in the district come from households that are eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the federal income support program, and about 80 percent are eligible for free and reduced lunch under federal food subsidies. District-wide 1980 census figures showed that more than 37 percent of families lived below the poverty level, and about 25 percent participated in public assistance programs, which at that time was the highest rate of any neighborhood in the city.[1] These conditions are associated with a broad array of social problems. The 1980 census showed that 20 percent of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 were not enrolled in school, and the absentee rate among those enrolled in school was about 15 percent. About 40 percent of those over the age 25 were high school graduates, and about 20 percent of the teenage women were mothers.[2]

In physical appearance, East Harlem shows signs of urban blight--abandoned cars,

poorly maintained public housing, deteriorating buildings, open drug trade, and the forced idleness of unemployment. The neighborhood is a welter of noise and congestion during most of the day; the subway moves above ground to divide the neighborhood; truck and car traffic converges from all over the city to cross the East River at 125th Street. But East Harlem is also a vibrant neighborhood of small storefronts, loud music, lively street corners, banners, handbills, Spanish newspapers, and children of all sizes and descriptions.

SCHOOL DECENTRALIZATION IN NEW YORK CITY

District 4 is one of 31 community districts of the New York City public school system, created in the late 1960s as part of an administrative decentralization. In the 1890s, each of the five burroughs ran its own schools with its own elected board of education which sent representatives to a citywide board that had largely symbolic functions. Beginning in the early 20th century, the city began a period of municipal reform, abolishing the borough boards and replacing them with 46 local boards appointed by borough presidents. One representative from each local board served on the central board. In 1917 the central board was reduced to seven members and local boards were reduced to an advisory capacity. The resulting system, characterized by a large number of local districts with largely symbolic functions, a small elected central board, and a large centralized administrative bureaucracy, has survived into the 1960s. [3] The central bureaucracy is known as the Board, or 110 Livingston Street, after its address in Brooklyn. One-Ten Livingston has, throughout its history, developed a deeply rooted reputation for being "insulated, rigid, and tradition-bound," and generally unresponsive to its clients. [4]

In the 1960s this centralized system came under increasing attack. From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, school enrollments in the city had undergone a dramatic shift,

from a predominantly white student population to predominantly black and Puerto Rican. Between 1950 and 1960, for example, there was a net out-migration of 1.2 million whites from the city and an in-migration of nearly 400,000 African Americans and Hispanics. White school enrollment dropped from over 650,000 to under 500,000 while black and Hispanic enrollment more than doubled, from just over 300,000 to 626,000. [5] These massive shifts in enrollment were associated with declines in measured achievement, accompanied by dissatisfaction among both minority and non-minority parents and alarm among local and state elected officials. The target of criticism increasingly became 110 Livingston Street, which was characterized as bloated and complacent in the face of the city's growing educational crisis.

During the 1960s, the city was also in the throes of series of largely unsuccessful attempts to desegregate the schools. A by-product of the later phases of desegregation was a collection of increasingly disillusioned, militant, and well-organized minority community groups. Under pressure from elected officials, foundations, and community groups, 110 Livingston initiated three experiments in decentralization and community control in the spring of 1967, with heavy financial support from the Ford Foundation. At the same time, Mayor John Lindsay appointed an advisory committee on school decentralization, chaired by McGeorge Bundy, former National Security Advisor to President Lyndon Johnson, and in 1967, President of the Ford Foundation. The Bundy committee was staffed by Mario Fantini, a Ford Foundation project officer with a strong personal and professional interest in what he called "model subsystems," or small decentralized units with high discretion that could feed new ideas to large bureaucratic structures. Its chief consultant was Marilyn Gittell, a political scientist from Queens College, whose earlier work had identified her as a severe critic of 110 Livingston and a strong advocate of decentralized control.

In January 1968, with the community control experiments underway, the Bundy Committee recommended a major decentralization of the system through the creation of community districts and delegation of most administrative and governance responsibilities to that level. In May 1968 a community board in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, one of the experimental districts created by 110 Livingston, involuntarily transferred 19 teachers, provoking a series of strikes the following fall which lasted from early September to mid-November. The Ocean-Hill Brownsville conflict turned the decentralization issue into an acrimonious compound of racial politics, union-community conflict, and city-state-school board conflict. [6]

Out of these conflicts grew a state law, in April 1969, setting the structure of the present system. Under this system, community districts, governed by boards elected from their communities and managed by superintendents appointed by the boards, have broad responsibilities for schools with kindergarten through 9th grades. The Board, or 110 Livingston Street, runs the city's high schools, a number of special programs, and retains a number of central planning, budgeting, and personnel functions. The decentralization law carefully hedged the main areas of contention between community groups, elected officials, and the Board. Community districts have major responsibilities for hiring, assigning, and evaluating teachers and administrators, but these responsibilities are nested within a system-wide structure of personnel rules and union contracts. Likewise, community districts exercise considerable discretion over budget and curriculum decisions, but these decisions are framed by complex system-wide and state-level constraints. [7]

Just how much decentralization of political and administrative control is actually present in the New York City system, we shall see, depends as much on how community districts conceive and act on their roles, as on the formal terms of delegation in the law.

The theory behind decentralization was that moving more authority to the neighborhood communities would create strong incentives for schools to better serve their students. Both the theory and the administrative apparatus of decentralization, however, left unspecified exactly how schools would improve, especially since many of the factors associated with poor performance were left unchanged by shifts in administrative control.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF DISTRICT 4

In the years immediately following decentralization, administrators and teachers in District 4 discovered that decentralization had a less positive side. In practice, decentralization seemed to be a way for 110 Livingston to push difficult problems and responsibilities out to the community districts. Seymour Fliegel, a 22-year veteran of the New York public schools, now District 4's deputy superintendent, recalls,

> In the early '70s, District 4 was at the bottom on almost every measure--poverty, school completion, dropping out, achievement test scores. We were a failing district; the worst in New York. Any problem you could think of, we had it. The [central] Board's attitude toward the district was benign neglect. "Try something, anything, just stay out of the papers." In some ways, it was a great advantage being the poorest district in New York. Almost everyone outside the district was convinced that we couldn't do much, didn't expect us to do much, didn't pay much attention to the things we did do. [8]

The district floundered in its early years, and then between 1972 and 1973, coincident with the election of Robert Rodriguez as president of the community board and the appointment of Anthony Alvarado as district superintendent, the district began to form a new view of itself.[9] Alvarado, a native of East Harlem, a former teacher in the neighborhood, and an ambitious and active administrator who later became Chancellor of the New York City Public Schools, launched new initiatives in reading and bilingual instruction and attracted new external funding to the district. Rodriguez took the view that

Alvarado should have broad discretion to pursue reforms in the district, and that the community board should keep its distance from day-to-day operating problems in the district.

Alvarado began his tenure as community superintendent by inviting principals and teachers to propose changes in their schools. The response was disappointing, producing little beyond requests for new materials and personnel. In 1973, Alvarado decided to look outside the district for new ideas. One person he approached was Deborah Meier, who had been working with teachers in a neighboring district to establish open classrooms. Meier accepted Alvarado's invitation to open a new school. In the fall of 1974 Central Park East (CPE), District 4's first alternative program, was started.

Meier insisted that the new program start small. Her preference was to begin with kindergarten and first grade, no more than 100 students, and extra staff. She also insisted that she be authorized to hire her own staff and that the staff be charged with developing its own curriculum. And finally, she insisted that parents should choose the program for their children, rather than being assigned to it. In finding space for the program, Alvarado and Meier eventually settled on two floors of an existing elementary school, P.S. 171, on 103rd Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues, which had excess space because of declining enrollment in the district. Meier hired her staff through the New York Open Education Network. She and her staff recruited their students. And they prepared the space for the school by moving out existing furniture, building new classroom fixtures, selecting materials, and the like.

The Central Park East program was characterized from its origins by a high level of interaction between teachers and parents, heavy reliance on teachers for curriculum development, extensive use of New York neighborhoods and cultural institutions for

instruction, and a high degree of collegial decision making among teachers.

In the early years, Central Park East faced predictable problems of a new and unorthodox educational program--uncertainty about enrollments, internal dissension, and threats from parents to withdraw their children if the school did not follow a more conventional path. It has since become a well-established school with a national reputation for academic excellence with inner-city youth.

One major source of tension in the early development of Central Park East was a disagreement between Meier and the principal with whom she shared a building over who had formal authority over instructional decisions. The principal who had initially agreed to locating CPE in PS 171 was replaced by another, less sympathetic principal, who saw CPE's presence and pedagogical approach as an affront to her authority. As other alternative programs developed, this dissatisfaction spread to other principals. For a brief period, it looked as if the principals might organize to oppose Alvarado and the alternative programs, but the opposition melted away. Asked why the principals' opposition faded, the PS 171 principal replied:

> Tony [Alvarado] bought them off. He bought me off too. ...with an extra position, additional materials, a program, and above all, with a school that I could operate with small enrollments. [10]

Participants give similar accounts of how Alvarado defused early opposition by the New York City teachers' union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), to Meier's authority to select staff for CPE. Meier agreed to hire one or two teachers she might not otherwise have hired in return for union cooperation. [11]

Throughout the development of Central Park East and other alternative programs, Alvarado, and Fliegel (who became director of alternative programs in District 4 in 1974)

signalled their clear support for Meier and other program directors to internal dissidents and opponents of the alternative programs among parents and community members. After a brief flurry of opposition, the community board settled into a mode of general support for the alternative programs.

With the early modest success of Central Park East, Alvarado and Fliegel began a gradual expansion of alternative programs. One path of expansion was to encourage the development of new programs. Two other programs were begun the same year as Central Park East--BETA, a 7th and 8th grade program for students with serious emotional and behavioral problems, and East Harlem Performing Arts, a 4th through 9th grade program which combined an academic and performing arts curriculum. Another path for expansion was to encourage "spin-offs" of existing programs. In 1980, Deborah Meier opened a second school, called Central Park East II (CPE II), which she directed as an annex of CPE I. CPE II expanded rapidly to about 190 students over two years, at which point Fliegel and Meier agreed that it should have independent status and its own director. In 1987, Meier, by then a MacArthur Fellow and a nationally recognized educator, left the directorship of CPE I to found a new kindergarten- through 12th-grade school, allied with Theodore Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools.

In Fliegel's view, the array of alternative programs and District 4's distinctive approach to parent choice grew out of accumulated experience and practice, rather than a preconceived model or plan. "I could be smart and say we had a long-range plan for expansion when we started, but it was really very organic," Fliegel says. "We started with two or three programs and then let others develop, consistent with our beliefs." [12]

OPERATING PRINCIPLES

In the founding of Central Park East were the seeds of some of the basic principles of organization that would later characterize District 4's approach. The program started small and grew at a deliberate pace to a maximum size considerably smaller than the typical urban elementary school. The small scale of the program meant that, of necessity, it could not occupy its own building, so it was housed with other programs in a common building. Meier herself assumed a role, "program director," that had no standing in the formal career structure of teachers and administrators in the New York public school system. Meier and the CPE teachers assumed responsibility for virtually all decisions about curriculum content and internal administrative matters, such as the use of teachers' time for non-instructional duties. And students came to CPE because they and their parents chose the school, not because they were assigned to it.

Fliegel, reflecting on nearly 15 years' experience, states District 4's operating principles as follows:

> First, each program has to have a clear theme, a goal, a vision. It doesn't matter so much what it is, if it's clear. The concept is a vehicle to get people engaged, not an end in itself. Basically, we agree on the overall goals of the system, what we're looking for are specific mechanisms that people can get behind.
>
> Second, smaller schools are better for kids. This comprehensive, big-school stuff is crap. Kids get lost in the shuffle in big schools. Our principle is that no school should be any larger than that size in which everyone knows everybody else. We have found that this principle requires sizes of from 180 to 220 students.
>
> Third is ownership--kids, parents, and teachers have to own the programs they participate in. Choice is important to us as a statement of ownership. [13]

In Fliegel's mind, there is no question about the order of priority among the three

principles, goals first, size second, and choice third.

> We have 49 schools in 20 buildings. It's not hard, you create identities. Each of those schools is autonomous. You go to an office building...you can have twenty businesses in that building. The concept of building-as-school doesn't make sense. School is school.
>
> Having a philosophical base or a vision or a dream is even more important. I think the size allows it to happen. If you just had a small school and the principal didn't know where he was going, fewer people would not know where they're going in more places. [14]

On the role of choice, he argues:

> I am concerned about the rush to choice that reflects ideological politics right now. If there isn't quality and diversity in educational programs, then choice is meaningless. If you start with a lousy district, choice isn't going to make it better. You have to start with good people who have good ideas in common and the skill to pull them off. Then choice is what creates a sense of ownership. [15]

And he continues:

> Well, if you have kids who selected your school, their parents selected your school, and the teachers selected that school, there's a sense of ownership. That school's going to do better than the school where you had to go or had no choices. Now, I'll grant you this, if you don't have quality, it doesn't make sense to have choices. I mean if I asked you to travel a half hour to go from one lousy to school to another, I've done nothing for you. So there has to be a degree of quality developed before the choices really begin to have any meaning. [16]

This point of view is shared by Deborah Meier, who notes:

> When we talk to parents about why they're interested in our school, they often don't attach the same level of importance as we do to the details of what we're trying to accomplish educationally. Sometimes you would be shocked at the reasons parents give for choosing one school over another. The important point is that they're here because someone wants them here and they're willing to be part of our community. If it doesn't work out--and it often doesn't--we help them find a mutually agreeable alternative. [17]

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

District 4 defies most conventional notions of school organization and management. The district administration, a relatively lean operation is housed in modest, improvised-looking quarters in a school building on a residential block of East 117th Street. The alternative programs office is staffed by a director and an assistant. There is a small support staff for curriculum and managerial functions.

Alternative Programs. The district administration offers a more-or-less standing invitation for any group of teachers to propose an alternative program. "We try to keep the barriers low and the bureaucratic hassles to a minimum," Fliegel says. He adds:

> If you have an idea and you can generate some support for it, then we ask you to give us a couple of pages describing what you're going to do. We press people, "How are you gonna do this?" We check people out. Most administrators aren't very serious about checking out teachers. The people who succeed at getting programs past the proposal stage are dedicated mavericks who don't fit into the existing structure, but who are very good at what they do. We have found that programs based on a person, rather an idea, don't make it. We stress that this is not a way out of the classroom; you have to be willing to work hard. [18]

There is not an oversupply of ideas for alternative programs, Fliegel says, because:

> Frankly, we exploit the hell out of people. There is almost no external reward for the extra effort. Most of the rewards are internal. As much as we try to keep the district hassles low, it is enormous work to get a program going and keep it going. [19]

Lynn Kearney, director of Manhattan East, a junior high academic magnet, describes working in an alternative program as follows:

> People are here because they want to be, and that's shown by the kind of attendance we have. The last time [teachers] referred to the contract was a long time ago. The contract spells out things that my teachers don't really have to do. And neither do I. I haven't had a duty-free lunch period since I came here, I don't think I ever will.

> My idea of education at its best is that people who work in it would have the power to do what they felt was good, and that they would feel happy about themselves when they left.
>
> This place doesn't have to exist. It could go out of business tomorrow. It's easy to go out of business. If it didn't meet needs, it would fold. It's a business in some ways--think about it--because we don't have children who have to come here. Then if one day everyone said no, we'd have to close our doors. [20]

Since the alternative programs were begun in 1974, three programs have been closed, both on the basis of judgement by school staff and district administrators that the programs were not of sufficient quality and not fulfilling their initial purposes. A former staff member at one of the terminated programs, The Sports School, who is now an assistant program director of the BETA program, said:

> It was a difficult time when the program was closed. I argued strongly for keeping it open and I still feel it wasn't given a fair chance to develop. But the facts were that we couldn't hold the staff together around the program and the district felt there wasn't enough there to justify the program. I still feel that this is a great place to teach, though, and I'm very happy where I am now. [21]

By a process of incremental growth, the district has moved to a point where about 20 percent of elementary students, and all junior high students, are enrolled in alternative programs, amounting to about 60 percent of all students in the district. Elementary students who do not enroll in alternative programs typically attend neighborhood schools, although intra-district transfer policies are highly permissive. Junior high schools are not zoned geographically, which means that at grade 6 every District 4 student must choose which school he or she will attend. High school enrollment is formally under the control of 110 Livingston, although as we shall see, District 4 exercises some influence over the high school enrollment of its students.

In January of every year, pamphlets describing alternative programs and applications are distributed to parents and students. The district-level Director of Alternative Programs conducts sessions at each elementary school for parents. The out-reach program is designed to reach every sixth-grader in the district because choice is universal at that level. Information on elementary programs is essentially client-driven, since choice is not universal at that level. Sixth grade students receive eight hours of explicit instruction in decision making. There are scheduled visiting times for prospective students at each school, and an unwritten rule that visits are encouraged at any time.

Students and parents are asked to select six programs in order of preference. Completed applications, accompanied by comments from the students' current teachers and program directors (in elementary alternative programs), are collected at the district's central office. Each elementary school has a follow-up procedure for late applications. Applications are circulated to programs by first preferences. Program directors and faculty are given one week to make initial selections. Then applications are again circulated by second preferences, this time with a tighter turn-around. And so on, until every student is paired with a school. Preference is given in the selection process to students with siblings already attending a given school, and some adjustments are made in the selection process for racial balance. District administrators estimate that about 90 percent of students receive one of their first three choices. Students may repeat the application process at the end of any term, but turnover in enrollment is small during the school year.

There are a significant number of transfers into District 4 from other areas of the city. District personnel estimate that during the 1987-88 school year about 1,900 of the district's 12,500 students, between 6 and 7 percent, were transfers. Although there are no hard estimates, teachers and district administrators think many of the transfers come from

two areas: the "silk stocking" area immediately to the south of District 4, and the Upper West Side "yuppie" area across Central Park and slightly south. Transfers from these areas provide two important factors for the alternative programs. The first is racial balance--a difficult commodity to come by in a district that is virtually 100 percent minority. Most of the transfer students are white. The second factor is more intangible, but no less important to personnel in district. Demand for transfers from outside the district gives a strong signal that the quality of District 4's programs is acknowledged by middle class and wealthy parents in the city. There are no transportation subsidies for children from outside the district and no other incentives besides the reputation of the district to attract transfers. Given the physical, cultural, and psychological constraints that must operate on white middle-class parents who contemplate sending their children to East Harlem schools, the transfers constitute an important asset to the district.

It is likely that the main alternative to District 4 schools for most transfers is not public schools in other parts of the city but private schools. After observing an integrated classroom in District 4's Science and Humanities School, a television feature reporter asked Fliegel if he was worried about the possibility of District 4's alternative programs becoming like the city's elite private schools. Fliegel replied, with a trace of irony:

> Well, I have a standing rule: What's good for the children of the wealthy, I will almost automatically accept for the children of East Harlem. Without question, if it's good enough for rich kids, I think we can impose it upon our poor kids. [22]

Transfers have created some bureaucratic and diplomatic problems with neighboring districts. City-wide policy requires that the district from which a student transfers must grant a waiver in order for students to change. District 3, immediately adjacent to District 4 on the south, has a "no-waiver" policy, according to District 4 administrators. Yet a

significant number of students from District 3 attend District 4 schools. This is accomplished, according to District 4 administrators, by informal arrangements--the students simply show up in the enrollment of District 4 without a formal waiver from their home district and the paperwork required to track the absence of a waiver is simply too cumbersome to make much difference. Discussion of the transfer issue left a clear impression, though, that it could become a serious problem if transfers increased beyond their present level.

Organization and Staffing. District 4 alternative programs present at least two major administrative problems. The first is that their small size, as noted above, means that the traditional relationship between physical plant and education program must be broken. This has been accomplished by locating multiple programs in a common building, sometimes with "regular" programs, sometimes mixing older and younger children, sometimes dedicating an entire building to several alternative programs. The second is a staff mix problem. If you increase the number of operating units by nearly two-and-one half times (from 20 self-contained schools to 49 programs housed in 20 facilities), while enrollment is constant or declining, it is not possible to maintain the same administrative and support structure. The organizational model that has evolved in response to this problem is one in which a program director, and an assistant, assume operating responsibilities at the program level, in concert with teaching duties. Alternative programs typically do not have the support staff of a traditional secondary school--curriculum coordinators, department chairs, counselors, etc. Instead, non-teaching duties are folded into the responsibilities of teachers and program directors. Principals, insofar as they continue to operate in the district, are associated with buildings, not programs. In some instances, they administer schools side-by-side with alternative programs in the same

building, exercising nominal, but little actual, authority over the programs. In at least one case, the principal is a building manager for a facility composed entirely of alternative programs, with responsibility for sorting out common use problems within the facility but with no actual supervisory responsibility over program directors.

This structure evolved on a pragmatic, piecemeal basis. In the process, District 4 administrators found that they were violating many prevailing conventions of school administration and some of the formal rules governing teacher-administrator relations. One of the first conventions to fall was the unwritten rule that adolescents shouldn't go to school with primary school children. This would seem to be an important issue in urban inner-city schools, especially where adolescence brings the problems of street life and drugs into the schools. According to Fliegel, District 4's experience defies convention.

> We found that locating adolescents and young kids in the same building had the opposite of the effect that people warned us about. The older kids' behavior improved and the younger kids simply took the presence of the older kids for granted. Of course, we spent some time educating everyone to what their responsibilities were. [23]

One graphic demonstration of this principle was the BETA program, which, until it was closed in 1988, enrolled adolescents who were experiencing serious behavioral problems. The BETA program was housed in the same building with the kindergarten through sixth grade Gifted and Talented Program, which enrolls mostly high-achieving students whose parents are likely to be quite alert to the conditions under which their children are learning. No one in the building considered this to be a remarkable occurrence.

Another convention that came under attack was that schools in inner-city neighborhoods, especially secondary schools, require a high level of support from non-instructional staff (counselors, assistant principals, social service personnel, etc.). In the alternative programs, these non-instructional roles have been largely eliminated and

replaced by a simple parsimonious structure in which there are few formal distinctions between instructional and non-instructional responsibilities. Discipline problems are handled collectively, or by directors, rather than by assistant principals. Personal problems are handled directly by teachers or program directors, or in selected schools by a school-family coordinator, who convenes students, parents or relatives, and teachers to discuss the students' problems and agree upon solutions. Academic program decisions are usually made informally and collectively, rather than through a departmental structure or an academic assistant principal. During one visit, for example, the program director and teaching staff of the Isaac Newton School for Math and Science were counseling students to help them prepare applications for the city's competitive academic high schools, a responsibility that would probably normally be borne by counselors or support staff. The Isaac Newton staff felt that the task was a natural outgrowth of their work with students. District administrators and the staff of alternative programs generally agree that non-instructional roles become less important as the scale of the program becomes smaller and as agreement on goals and rules increases.

Still another convention that has been relaxed in alternative programs is the rigid formal distinction between teaching and administrative roles. As noted above, program directors usually teach as well as administer. Since the role of program director has no standing in the formal occupational structure set by policy and collective bargaining contracts, distinctions in status and compensation between program director and teachers are minimal. There is also significant movement into and out of program director roles. At Isaac Newton, for example, the founding director returned to full-time teaching after six years as director and was replaced by an assistant director he had recruited and groomed. As noted earlier, Deborah Meier has moved through a succession of directorships, leaving

behind experienced people to assume directorships. Fliegel observes that leadership succession is commonly handled in alternative programs by an existing director grooming a successor and then either moving to a new program or returning to full-time teaching.

The introduction of program directors took place gradually, as alternative programs were started. Tensions with teachers' and supervisors' unions were sorted out on a case-by-case basis and did not become formal matters for collective bargaining. Unions have informally raised a number of questions about the staffing of alternative programs--teacher and administrator transfers related to the transition from traditional to alternative schools, payment of program directors under teacher rather than administrator pay scales, and teaching out-of-license resulting from more flexible use of teachers. But the unions have, to this point, not made formal bargaining issues of these concerns. According to district administrators, potential problems with principals have been handled by skillful use of attrition to phase down the number of certified principals, and by paying attention to the concerns of principals who stay. Potential problems with teachers unions have been neutralized, according to district administrators, by teachers themselves. "You provide teachers an opportunity to do a first-rate job with kids who many people think can't make it in school," one administrator said, "and you give everyone a sense of purpose--it's very difficult to make a labor relations issue out of this kind of change without making the union look silly." [24] Fliegel has seen a gradual acceptance of the alternative programs emerge among principals. "Our biggest enemies in the beginning--principals who were threatened--have become our biggest supporters, because they realize that everyone benefits from doing well." [25]

Many of the changes in organization and staffing in District 4 have been the result of skillful use of declining enrollment as a management tool. As with the almost all urban

school systems, New York has undergone precipitous enrollment declines since the late-1960s. These declines are the occasion for a number of managerial problems--facilities, staffing, budget, and program content. In most instances, districts have responded by holding the traditional form of the organization constant and simply reducing its size. District 4 has instead responded by using enrollment decline, in part, as a mechanism for changing the form of the organization--creating smaller-scale units, making more flexible use of facilities, and squeezing administrative overhead out of the system. In effect, these changes have meant that significantly more resources are focused directly on instruction and that major changes in the instructional program have been made within the regular operating budget of the system, without supplementary funding.

Relations with 110 Livingston. The relationship of District 4 to the New York City Board of Education--110 Livingston--have never been positive; they have instead ranged from calculated indifference to outright conflict. Fliegel, echoing a century-old complaint, describes 110 Livingston as "3,100 people looking for something to do." [26] In the early phases of community decentralization, as noted above, 110 Livingston's posture was characterized as benign neglect by District 4 personnel. As the alternative programs began to develop, and as junior high students began to emerge from the programs, tensions between the district and 110 Livingston began to mount. The major source of tension was 110 Livingston's control of high schools, exercised by the High School Division. Fliegel describes the situation in the following way:

> New York City high schools do not do a good job, except for some of the specialized high schools. What happens to the good kids who come out of our alternative programs? We have no input into their future, except when we help them compete for slots in the specialized high schools. The central administration--and the high school division is the worst of them--is incredibly rigid. Their response to our problem was to tell us to send our kids to Ben Franklin High School [in the neighborhood].

Now, Ben Franklin had a distinguished past. It was one of city's best high schools, and the first to have an Italian principal. But by the early 1980s it had become a disgrace--about seven percent of the entering freshman graduated; they had a 42 percent attendance rate. So we went to the Board and said we wanted to establish a math-science center that cut across elementary, junior high, and high school.

The high school part really threw them for a loop. The High School Division went nuts. The principal and parents association opposed us. They gave us all kinds of crap about what a great tradition the school had and how you couldn't shut it down. They said, "why don't you turn it into a sports school?" Now, that was a laugh--it already was. They won the state high school basketball championship.

Essentially, we cut a deal with the High School Division. They got formal control over the new program and the credit. We got the responsibility and opportunity to start a new program and the risk of failure.

We closed Ben Franklin in June 1982, and opened the Manhattan Center for Math and Science in September 1982. We didn't get started recruiting the high school kids until May, so we had to recruit through the summer. We took 150 kids from the district who hadn't been accepted by other specialized high schools. We made a big deal out of the selection process; we interviewed kids, made the interviews classy. We formed an alliance with Donna Shalala [President of Hunter College at that time], and we promised kids, "this school will prepare you for a technological society, and if you graduate you will go to college." Shalala agreed. After a year, we got Cole Genn as a principal, on the theory that if you own the principal you own the school. In 1986, every kid in the first class graduated and went to college.

We didn't know anything about high school when we started. All we knew is that we didn't want to know what they [the High School Division] knew.

I think they [110 Livingston] were counting on us to fail. Not only did we succeed, we have just opened our second high school--Debby Meier's new school. We are the only community district in the city with its own high schools. This has caused problems with the High School Division, and we've had to take on the head of the Division and the Chancellor a couple of times, but we've made our point. [27]

For the most part, citywide and state policies on academic content and testing seem to have had little effect on District 4's ability to mount and sustain alternative programs.

The district seems to have established a reputation for performance, within and outside the city, that buffers it from specific criticisms that it is not covering certain content or producing specific test results. District administrators and school-level personnel regard citywide testing as a necessary evil that is largely irrelevant to their central concerns, but feel it is game they can play with skill to their own advantage.

By conventional views of school organization and management, District 4 is an anomaly. In the views of its administrators and the teaching staff of alternative programs, it has reduced the scale of operating units and the rigidity of instructional and administrative roles in a city school system characterized by inertia and inflexibility. It has created a sense of mission and engagement in a time of declining enrollment and declining resources and in a community where many outside observers would not have predicted success. It has wrested control over key activities from a school bureaucracy that is thought to be one of the most difficult and resistant in the country.

EFFECTS

Asked to summarize the effects of their approach, District 4 staff cite a broad array of evidence. First is improvement in student achievement and attainment. According to district figures, about 16 percent of District 4 students were reading at grade level in 1973, and by 1985 that proportion had increased to about 53 percent. Dropout rates from alternative programs are estimated by district personnel to be about 1 percent, and the rate of college attendance from alternative programs is estimated to be about 50 percent. About 15 District 4 students were accepted to competitive high schools in the city in 1973, by 1985 that number had risen to 356.

Second, staff in the alternative programs clearly defy the stereotype--whether true

or not--of the cynical, battle-hardened urban school teacher who has adjusted to a hostile environment by lowering expectations, disengaging from serious work, and getting through the day. One indicator of engagement on the part of teachers is the amount and sophistication of discourse about the purposes and methods of their work. Almost every teacher, and every program director, can give a capsule description of what they are trying to achieve and how they are trying to achieve it. Here is John Drescher, a teacher at the School for Performing Arts, talking about the relationship between performing arts and academic content in response to the question, "Do you tell your students they will become stars?"

> No. We tell them that if they work hard, then maybe they'll succeed in life. And maybe they'll have a shot at going out there and dealing with the issues that they're going to face. . . . Hopefully, if you get someone who is interested in the arts and they come in here and they've just had a scintillating dance class, then ...you think that's going to carry over and they'll have a scintillating science class. It works sometimes. Sometimes they don't have a scintillating dance class and they still have a scintillating science class. But the basic premise of motivating kids by using the arts really does work. [28]

Here is Deborah Meier, analyzing a brief observation of a high school class in which a student--a young black woman--is obviously struggling in an effort to lead a group discussion of a social studies assignment:

> That was a little ragged, but really very good. We've got a very nice mix of students in that group--all ability levels. And the thing we're working on is to get the teacher to hang back long enough so the other students will get in and help, in a useful way. Did you see the expression on their faces when she started getting into trouble? And the way they got into the discussion? She wouldn't have thought of putting herself in that situation two weeks ago. That's really quite special. I think we're making progress. [29]

Here is Howard Braybow, a mid-career teacher in his second year at the Science and Humanities School, describing his experience making the transition from another school:

> I found that all of the children walked in the first day with their pens, with their notebooks all prepared to do work, and that was exciting, and this kind of spirit carries over to the teacher--the motivation of the kids-- carries through to me as a teacher and I was really enthusiastic. It was like a rebirth in a way.
>
> I have asked them why do you want to be here and you didn't choose one of the other schools in the district, and the answer I got was that we like it here, it's nice here, it's quiet here, there are no problems here, I'm not afraid to walk to the bathroom, I'm not afraid to walk through the halls, and I think the parents pick that up also. [30]

Here is a young black female teacher in BETA, a former District 4 program for students with serious behavioral and emotional problems, who is in the middle of stern lecture about classroom behavior, when a visitor enters the classroom:

> Come right on in. We were just having a discussion about acting out in class. [Turning to class] By now you know what makes my crazy, and you know I'm going to go up in smoke when you act like that. We're here to work. Period. If you've got a problem that needs working out, we have a place for that. In here, it's business. You read? Now, next week. . . .

The students, several of whom are physically half-again the size of the teacher, are uniformly subdued, serious, quiet, and shaken--no snickers, no sideways glances, no defiance. The sense of chagrin is palpable. Later, the director of BETA says,

> This is an outstanding place. The best. We've got kids in this program who have already been certified by the mental health people as ready to be institutionalized. We're the only thing between them and it. We hang with them, we care about them, we treat them like people who can learn and be self-sufficient, and a lot of them respond. We lose some too. But a lot respond. People who work here are here because they want to work with these kids and they get a lot of reinforcement--from each other, from the District, and from other teachers.

Another indicator of engagement is the physical appearance of the buildings and rooms. From the outside, there is little to distinguish school buildings in District 4 from those in any other low-income urban neighborhood, with the exception that there is little

graffiti and no visible evidence of drug dealing. The buildings are generally old--the newest date from the late 1950s--sterile, and unappealing. Inside, however, they are clean and well maintained. The floors sparkle, the rooms look like the people who use them enjoy being there, the halls buzz and pop. Computers are everywhere and in regular use. The performing arts program boasts a classroom that has been converted to a dance studio with a professional quality dance floor that is buffed to a mirror-like surface. Students' work is everywhere--inside and outside classrooms. In New York City, it is common for teachers and principals to complain about building maintenance and physical plant. Custodians are independent contractors paid a lump sum amount, from which they pay their own salaries and hire their own assistants. District 4 administrators, when asked about the appearance of the buildings, say, with enigmatic smiles, "Yes. We have a lot of friends in the city who provide us with things that make the schools work well. And we are fortunate to have good relations with our custodians. Anything that requires contracting is generally a disaster, but we've figured out how to get things done." [31]

For the skeptic, District 4 raises at least one fundamental question about student effects. One consequence of District 4's approach is that a substantial proportion of students--80 percent of elementary students, about 40% overall--do not have access to alternative programs, which are the focus of instructional improvement in the district. While the district can point to overall improvements in student achievement and attainment, it is less clear what the consequences are for students who don't participate in alternative programs. Furthermore, the overall strategy of District 4 doesn't lead necessarily to increased access to alternative programs--the creation of new programs is driven by teacher initiative and standards of quality, not by the objective of serving all students. One district administrator argued:

We still have a lot of problems outside the alternative programs, but there is no question in my mind that having the alternative programs has pulled the other schools along. Everyone has become more sensitive to quality. Can I say that kids in the regular programs are all well served? Of course not. But what's your standard? If it's what other schools are doing with these kids--in this city or any other--then we're clearly doing well. If it's creating schools that any parent--regardless of income or race--would want to send their kid to, then we're clearly doing well.

NOTES

1. Data provided by Community District 4.

2. Data provided by Community District 4.

3. Melvin Zimet, Decentralization and School Effectiveness: A Case Study of the 1969 Decentralization Law in New York City (New York: Teachers College Press, 1973), 3.

4. David Rogers, 110 Livingston Street (New York: Random House, 1968), 477.

5. State Charter Commission for New York City, Impact of School Decentralization in New York City on Municipal Decentralization, June 1974, 23.

6. Zimet, Decentralization and School Effectiveness, 8-13; and Diane Ravitch, The Great School Wars: New York City, 1805-1973, A History of the Public Schools as a Battlefield of Social Change (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 312ff.

7. Ibid., 15-35.

8. Interview, October 9, 1987.

9. The following account of the early history of District 4 is drawn from, David Bensman, Quality Education in the Inner City: The Story of the Central Park East School (Central Park East School, 1987).

10. Ibid., 36.

11. Ibid., 37.

12. Interview, MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, March 23, 1987.

13. Interview, October 9, 1987.

14. Interview, MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, March 23, 1987.

15. Interview, October 9, 1987.

16. Interview, MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, March 23, 1987.

17. Interview, October 7, 1987.

18. Interview, October 7, 1987.

19. Ibid.

20. MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, March 23, 1987.

21. Interview, October 7, 1987.

22. MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, March 23, 1987.

23. Interview, October 7, 1987.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Interview, MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, March 23, 1987.

29. Interview, October 7, 1987.

30. MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, March 23, 1987.

31. Interview, October 7, 1987.